

Find Your Role, Do Your Part

Navy ships provide vital humanitarian assistance to hurricane ravaged areas

By JO1(SW) Mike Jones, USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7) Public Affairs

The humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast carried out by USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7) and her sister ships USS Tortuga (LSD 46), USS Shreveport (LPD 12), USS Bataan (LHD 5) and USS Whidbey Island (LSD 41) in the wake of Hurricane Katrina were already underway when President George W. Bush took to the podium at Jackson Square in downtown New Orleans to address the nation on Sept. 15. By then, the ships had reached a steady battle-rhythm, and humanitarian assistance from the Navy ships and their crews to the battered city helped fuel the message behind the President's remarks: "Find your role and do your part."

"This crew has showcased a truly historic effort during this mission," said Iwo Jima Commanding Officer Capt. Richard S. Callas. *"They fulfilled what the President asked of them during his speech at Jackson Square. Every Sailor and Marine, without being asked or directed, found their role, and did their part."*

Since departing her homeport on Aug. 31, Iwo Jima emerged as the center of Joint Task Force Katrina and Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)-led recovery and assistance efforts in the battered cities of Biloxi, Gulfport and New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina's landfall Aug. 29.

Within three days of receiving the order to sail to the Gulf Coast, Iwo Jima along with Tortuga and Shreveport steamed from Norfolk to anchorages off the coast of Biloxi, Miss., to join USS Bataan who was already on station conducting search and rescue operations and relief efforts with her helicopters and amphibious craft. Immediately upon arrival, the ships landed elements of Naval Beach Group Two to establish a beachhead for the delivery of much needed supplies to the battered community.

Even as beach crews were establishing a presence for the arriving Seabees of 1st Naval Construction Division, thousands of pounds of humanitarian supplies were delivered ashore on landing crafts. For the crew of Iwo Jima, especially those who called the storm-affected region home, the opportunity to assist was eagerly embraced.



New Orleans (Sept. 20, 2005) - President George W. Bush receives a briefing in the wardroom aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7) during his third visit to the ship. Iwo Jima was pierside in New Orleans, La., in support of Joint Task Force Katrina. U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 3rd Class Christian Knoell.

"We train and train and train to respond to any situation we're needed for," said Hospital Corpsman 3rd Class Jonathan C. Tillman who hails from Baton Rouge, La., *"For me, and a lot of my shipmates from this part of the country, the chance to help out in any way is one I would never pass up. I want to be able to say I did everything I possibly could to help out."*

Tillman departed LHD 7 with the first group from Amphibious Construction Battalion Two to begin operations to clear roads, repair bridges, open up harbor facilities and repair critical infrastructure to facilitate the follow-on delivery of relief.

Less than 24 hours later with the off-load complete, Iwo Jima was again underway and transiting up the Mississippi River toward New Orleans. Even before the ship moored at the city's Riverwalk Pier (normally reserved for cruise liners) Sept. 5, Iwo Jima's flight deck (referred to as the Jack Lucas Airfield after the Iwo Jima hero and Medal of Honor recipient) came alive as numerous aircraft from various military and federal agencies touched down. As one of the few full-service airfields in the area, Iwo Jima's flight deck conducted approximately 1,600 flight evolutions over the next two weeks, averaging 100 hits a day during the ship's mission in New Orleans.

"What we did in one week might normally take nine," said ABHCS (AW) James C. Wright, Flight Deck Leading Chief Petty Officer.

Iwo Jima also contained the only fully-functioning medical and dental facilities in the area. With 85 additional medical professionals from the Portsmouth Naval Hospital, medical personnel performed 50 major surgical procedures — two of them life threatening, averaging 20 patients a day, who arrived by boat, ambulance and helicopter to receive medical care. Iwo Jima's dental team saw over 100 patients as well.

In addition to its flight deck and medical capabilities, much of Iwo's crew took time to assist the stricken community through many volunteer relief projects. Hull technicians (HT) and damage controlmen (DC) worked around the clock to assist dewatering efforts at local medical facilities, including the Medical Center of Louisiana's Charity Hospital.

"This support from the Navy couldn't be better," remarked U.S. Coast Guard Intelligence Officer Norman Bond, who organized the assistance after contacting Iwo's Command Master Chief CMDCM (SW/AW) Jim Cox and DCC (SW/AW) Fred Clemmons. "The waterline was almost at the top of the basement when they began dewatering," said Charity Hospital staff member Dr. Jeff Johnson. "I am amazed at how fast they've been able to remove so much water. I didn't expect this much progress for months." The dewatering team worked through the night, Clemmons added, removing water from the hospital at a rate of 1,900 gallons per minute.

That same group was able to repair the massive air conditioning system in the city's convention center, bringing much-needed relief to the 1,650 National Guard members living there. Also, members of Iwo Jima's Aircraft Intermediate Maintenance Department along with HTs from Engineering helped convert a baseball dugout into a decontamination station for relief workers of the Jefferson Parish Emergency Operations Center (EOC), headquartered in the field's adjacent gymnasium.

"This team came out to our EOC to get an idea of what they could provide," said Jefferson Parish FEMA Strike Team Leader Dan Griffiths. "We only had cold water showers at the time."

The EOC, located at the Belle Terre Playground facility, was staffed by approximately 110 personnel from various state and federal agencies, including the U.S. Coast Guard, Army Corps of Engineers and regional fire departments. All 110 were housed in the adjacent J. Harry Walker III Memorial Gym, and until Iwo's Sailors arrived, were sharing three sinks and three toilets among them.

"The installation of the additional sinks and showers has been an enormous morale boost for all the relief workers out here," Griffiths said. "There is no doubt in anyone's minds [about] the contributions by these guys to help us in our mission of saving lives."

"It's like having the cavalry show up," said U.S. Coast Guard Chief Warrant Officer Allen Mordica. "This makes getting the job done much easier."

For the city's first responders, among them the 119th Military Police Company of the Rhode Island National Guard and U.S. Army 82nd Airborne Division, the ship provided a welcome relief to the tedious and often hazardous recovery efforts. Within hours of arrival, Iwo Jima began providing hot meals, hot showers and cool air conditioning to thousands of the city's first responders. In total, Iwo Jima served over 41,000 extra meals — averaging nearly 3,000 extra meals a day, 400 showers daily and laundry services for "tons of laundry" for their guests — all without additional manning. Nearly 8,000 Soldiers, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, Sailors, civilians and National Guardsmen cycled on-board the "Hotel Iwo Jima."

Much of the crew devoted off-duty hours helping to clean the Riverwalk Terminal and surrounding areas, including the entire Riverwalk Plaza, and volunteered at a soup kitchen established at the base of the city's World Trade Center to provide hot meals for tens of thousands of first responders.



New Orleans (Sept. 17, 2005) – Crew members assigned aboard USS Iwo Jima (LHD 7), cook for community workers in New Orleans during hurricane relief efforts.

U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate Airman Amanda M. Williams.

One of those first responders was Army Pvt. Trenton Graves, mobilized with E Troop, 82nd Calvary of the Oregon National Guard, deployed to assist with relief and recovery efforts in New Orleans earlier that month. His cousin is Iwo Jima's Fire Controlman 3rd Class (SW/AW) Dave Thalman. *"I got a call from my mom that Dave would be down here too," Graves said. "As soon as I found out that his ship was down here, I tried to hook up with him."*

Graves and the rest of E Troop had been providing security and assistance around New Orleans and outlying parishes since the beginning of the month. Sept. 16 brought a welcome break: the Troop would stop by the volunteer-run food tent at the city's World Trade Center for a hot meal and a few minutes rest. As it turns out, Thalman was one of the many Iwo Jima Sailors volunteering at that very location that day.

"It was great to run into him and see him again," Thalman said. "I'm going to give him a tour of the ship and show him all the things we've been doing to assist down here as well."

For the cousins, the reunion proved bittersweet amid the backdrop of ongoing hurricane recovery and relief work. *"It's definitely rewarding to know we're able to do something," Thalman said. "And knowing I'm down here with family makes it worthwhile."*

By the middle of September, most of Iwo Jima's support efforts had wound down. The arrival of Hurricane Rita accelerated the ship's departure. Iwo Jima transited down the Mississippi into the Gulf late on Sept. 21 as Hurricane Rita quickly grew in strength and approached the area. Sailing within 250 miles of the hurricane's eye, Iwo Jima followed behind the storm's path, ready to provide immediate rescue and recovery assistance as the storm made landfall near the border of Texas and Louisiana.

A week later, after receiving orders to officially depart the Gulf of Mexico, the multi-purpose, amphibious assault ship steamed toward the Florida Keys and into the Atlantic Ocean. On Oct. 1, Iwo Jima off-loaded 650 Marines of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (24 MEU) and First Battalion Eight Marines at Onslow Bay, N.C., then returned home to Norfolk, Va., Oct. 2.

"Our time in New Orleans was an extraordinary opportunity to help out during a time of great need," Callas said. "We didn't get a whole lot of direction or tasking other than to sail up the Mississippi and embark the Joint Task Force Katrina Commander, but in typical Navy fashion, we saw the need, found our own missions and did our part. We're grateful to have had the chance." CHIPS